

Men, did you or someone you know experience unwanted sexual experiences or harassment in the military?

If so, you're not alone.

Strength and Recovery

Men Overcoming Military Sexual Trauma



Read on to learn about other men's experiences and some helpful information for you.

What is Military Sexual Trauma?

Military sexual trauma, or MST, refers to sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurred during a Veteran's military service.

MST can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, strength, size, age, race, sexual orientation, or branch or era of service.

MST can include experiences such as:

- ☐ Being pressured into sexual activities, either with threats or with promises of better treatment
- ☐ Being unable to consent, such as when asleep or intoxicated
- ☐ Being physically forced or overpowered
- ☐ Unwanted sexual touching or grabbing
- ☐ Repeated and offensive remarks about one's body or sexual activities
- ☐ Threatening and unwelcome sexual advances



Other things to know: MST can happen repeatedly. The reason doesn't matter; even if it was called "hazing," it is still MST. Also, the perpetrator(s) may or may not be known to you, may be male or female, and may be Servicemembers or civilians.

Veterans from many different backgrounds have experienced MST, and much of what you read here may apply to both men and women.

However, this brochure focuses on male Veterans' experiences and concerns.

You Are Not Alone

Men often don't talk about sexual trauma, so survivors may think they're the only ones it's ever happened to. VA health care providers ask all Veterans about MST for this reason.

Many men have taken the brave step to speak up. In fact, almost half of all Veterans who tell a VA provider they experienced MST are men.

What Makes MST so Difficult for Many Men?

There are many reasons. Other male Veterans have said things like:

- “This can't happen to me. This doesn't happen to men.”
- “I felt like less of a man after, sometimes like not even a man at all.”
- “I tried to move on and forget it. It's probably too late now.”
- “I should have been able to stop it. It was my fault.”



For many men, other issues are also critical:

- Men may have had uncontrollable biological reactions like an erection or ejaculation during MST. This does **not** mean that they wanted or enjoyed it. It also does not mean anything about their sexual orientation.
- Men's background and identity, like their age, race, religion, and abuse or trauma prior to military service, can also affect their reactions to MST.

Some Common Reactions in Men

Some men recover on their own. Others struggle with some common reactions, even many years later. Many men say they are:

- ☐ Angry, especially when feeling threatened or betrayed
- ☐ Ashamed or feeling damaged or like a failure
- ☐ Worried about masculinity or sexual orientation
- ☐ Having sexual functioning difficulties such as low sex drive or erectile problems
- ☐ On edge, on guard, or having panic attacks
- ☐ Numb, flat, or unable to give or feel love or happiness
- ☐ Using alcohol, drugs, reckless behavior, or unsafe sex to shut off memories and feelings
- ☐ Having conflicts with others or difficulty trusting
- ☐ Feeling isolated or avoiding reminders
- ☐ Having trouble with sleep, focus, or memory
- ☐ Having chronic pain or digestive problems
- ☐ Having eating problems or negative body image

If you can relate to some of these, that doesn't mean you're “crazy” or “weak.” In fact, they are very understandable. However, it is also possible to feel better over time.



You Deserve a Better Quality of Life

- Many men have difficulties with their experience of MST long after it occurred. You may still blame yourself, for example. However, as you move forward, we hope you come to realize that **MST is never your fault.**
- Men are taught to be silent and show no emotion, but other men who experienced MST want you to know that healing is possible.
- No matter how long it has been, you can still get your life back and begin a new chapter free of anger, guilt, or despair.

***Fight the good fight.** Even if you are doing well or choose to cope with MST on your own, find safe ways to take care of your physical and mental health. You'll stay healthy and have a better quality of life.*



It's Never Too Late, and It's Never Too Soon

VA is committed to helping all Veterans who are struggling and need help to recover from MST.

- All VA treatment for physical and mental health problems related to MST is **confidential** and **free**.
- You **do not** need to have reported the MST when it happened or have documentation that it occurred.
- You **do not** need to be service connected and may be able to receive MST-related care **even** if you are not eligible for other VA care.
- You can ask to meet with a provider of the same or opposite sex if it would be more comfortable for you.
- All VA health care providers receive training on MST, including information about men's experiences.
- Every VA health care system also has an **MST Coordinator**, a point person who can help you access VA services and may know of additional resources.

"It takes a lot of courage and strength to speak up. Treatment helped me to get better and stay independent."



Moving Forward in Your Recovery

There are many steps you can take to move forward after MST. At first, many men try to pretend it didn't happen. However, if doing that isn't helping or you feel stuck, consider talking to someone.

- Telling a VA provider that you experienced MST can be a big but healthy step. You should know that you can do this without feeling the need to commit to further services.
- If you are struggling, there are proven, effective treatments for many problems associated with MST.
- MST-related treatments can include medical care, outpatient, residential, and inpatient counseling, and medications.
- In treatment, you will partner with your provider(s) to set goals at your pace and build on your strengths. It's your choice whether to talk about your experiences of MST. You may also focus on learning new tools or skills that will help you build a better life.
- Keep trying and you'll find something that fits for your recovery.

Resources to Help You Move Forward

- If you are struggling, you can call the Veterans Crisis Line at [1-800-273-TALK \(8255\)](tel:1-800-273-TALK) or visit www.veteranscrisisline.net. Operators are specially trained and experienced in helping Veterans, and many are also Veterans themselves.
- Check out www.maketheconnection.net to see and hear stories from other male Veterans. (Click "Video Gallery" at the top, then from the menu on the left check "Male," and under "Conditions" check "Effects of Military Sexual Trauma.")
- Visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp to learn about MST and VA programs and services.
- Talk to a VA health care provider, call and ask for the MST Coordinator at your nearest VA Medical Center, or call a local Vet Center. Find local VA and Vet Center facilities at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov.
- Veterans can receive compensation for conditions that began or got worse in the line of duty, including injuries or disabilities related to MST. A Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) MST Coordinator at your nearest Regional Office can explain more. Visit www.va.gov for a list of VBA Regional Offices or call VA's general hotline at [1-800-827-1000](tel:1-800-827-1000).

